FRANK READE WEEKLY MAGAZINE,

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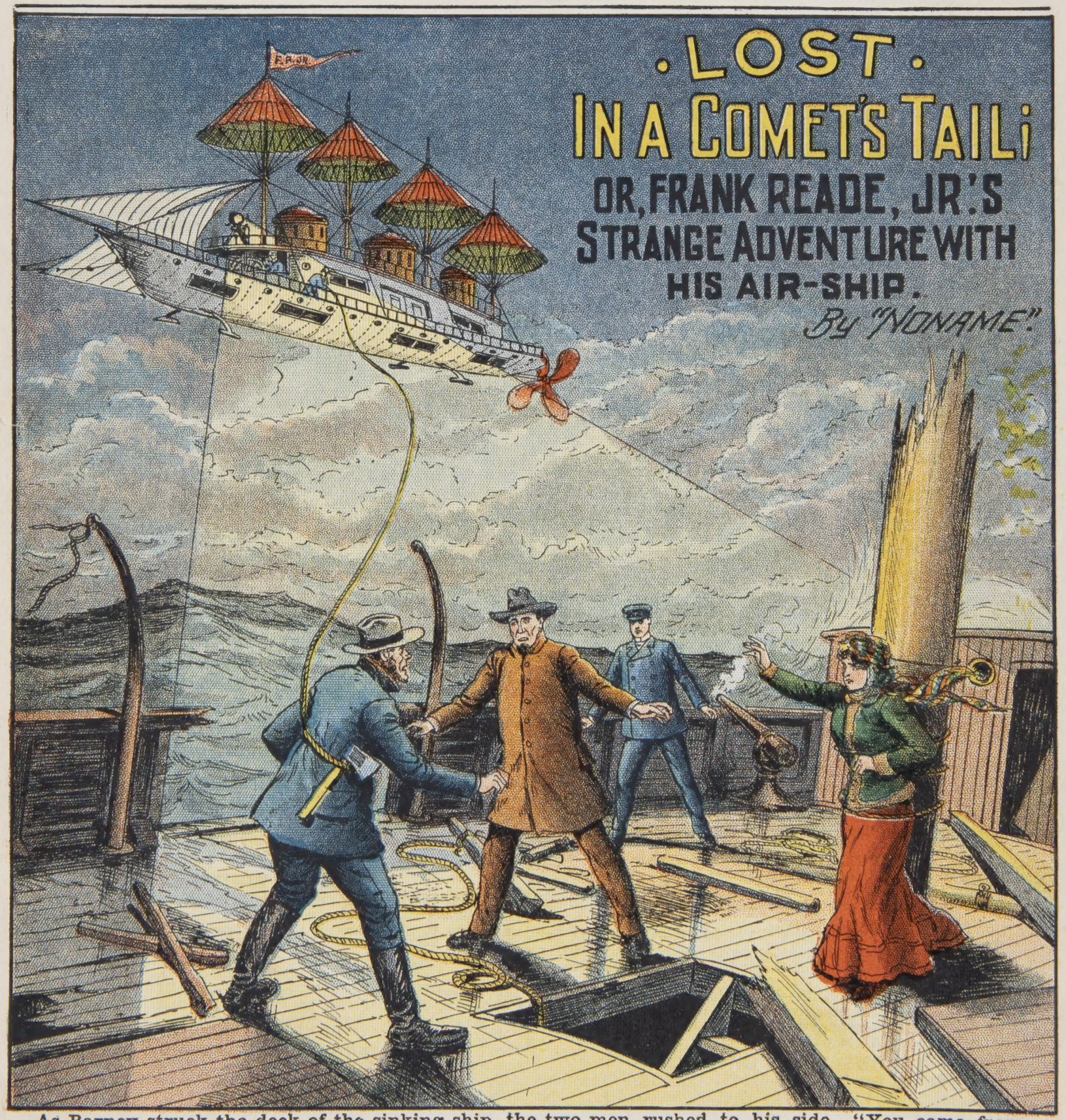

LOST IN A COMET'S TAIL;

OR, FRANK READE, JR.'S STRANGE ADVENTURE WITH HIS AIR-SHIP.

By "NONAME."

As Barney struck the deck of the sinking ship, the two men rushed to his side. "You came from the clouds," cried the youth. "Roight!" answered Barney, "I cum down from Misther Frank Reade, Jr.'s, air ship."

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(Continued on page 3 of cover.)

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FRANK READE, JR.'S STRANGE ADVENTURE WITH HIS AIRSHIP.

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CHAPTER I.

THE GREAT COMET—THE AIRSHIP.

It was well known in astronomical circles that the comet of Verdi was due to appear at a certain date below the Southern Cross. It would come into view gradually until in the course of a month its fullest size would be reached.

Then it would decline to the extreme south and vanish into space.

These were carefully made deductions.

How near the earth Verdi's comet would come had been a matter of some dispute.

Certain astronomers affirmed that it would not come nearer than two millions of miles, while others averred positively that its nebulous tail would actually brush its way into the verge of the earth's atmosphere.

However this would be, there was but one spot on earth where this wonderful manifestation could be seen by man, and that was at an inaccessible point.

At least it had always been believed to be inaccessible—namely, a certain cape on the verge of the Antarctic continent.

To reach this point at that time of year was deemed flatly impossible.

All the scientific journals were teeming with the subject.

Among those interested was one man who made a very bold statement.

"I can reach the Antarctic continent in time to witness the nearest approach of the comet's tail and its possible encroachment upon the earth's atmosphere."

The man who made this daring announcement was no other than Frank Reade, Jr., America's well-known and most famous young inventor.

Frank Reade, Jr., now had completed a new and powerful airship.

For he was the fortunate man to have solved the problem of aerial navigation. The whole world was acquainted with his famous works.

Upon the publication of this declaration the young inventor was immediately overwhelmed with letters and prayers testamentary from thousands of people of all classes.

There were propositions from scientific circles, proposals

and suggestions from scientists and learned men. There were also all kinds of requests from travelers and explorers.

The most of these wished the privilege of accompanying the young inventor upon the famous tour or trip of observation.

Frank was obliged to employ an extra clerk to answer to the chief of the requests. Others found their way into the waste basket, particularly those written by cranks and maniacs, many of which contained threats.

So immense became the volume of letters that Frank declared:

"Dear me; I wish I had said nothing at all about it, but just gone on my way quietly."

Finally he was forced to issue a circular letter and mail it everywhere to the effect that if he entertained all requests to accompany him favorably he would be obliged to build a thousand airships. Hence the utter impossibility of granting the same must be seen. Furthermore, he had decided to go alone upon the trip, with only his two trusty colleagues, Barney and Pomp, as companions, for if he particularized in anybody's favor he would surely be accused of partiality and lose the good will of many whose friendship he did not care to relinquish.

And so forth.

This had a somewhat quenching effect, but even up to the very day of the departure he was overrun with the most audacious of proposals.

"Golly, Marse Frank," said Pomp, the negro who had been his servant for many years, "de people habn't jes' got de leastest bit ob sense. I don't see why dey can't tumble to de fac' dat yo' kain't take dem all wif yo'!"

"Well," laughed Frank, "persistence is a human attribute, and each is probably hoping that he will be the lucky one."

"As a result, sah, dere won't be no lucky one."

"Just so."

"Bejabers, naygur!" cried Barney O'Shea, the Irishman, as he tucked Pomp playfully in the ribs, "it's sthayin' to home oursilves we'll maybe be if Misther Frank takes that notion."

"Huh!" retorted Pomp, intentionally putting his number ten down onto Barney's toe. "Ain't a bit surprised to heah yo' say dat, I'ish. Dere ain't any too much room abo'd the Cloud Cutter, an' de cook am de las' one to be lef' behin', yo' bet."

"Don't yez be gay wid me, yez black misfit. Shure Misther Frank wud niver lave me at home."

And so the two jokers went on. They were at heart the warmest of friends, but given greatly to nagging and practical jokes.

Readestown was all astir one fine morning.

It had been announced that the departure in the new airship was to be taken that day.

A large crowd was thronged in front of the machine shop gates, and all anxiously awaited a view of the famous aerial craft.

The Cloud Cutter had been constructed under the roof of the great high trussed construction shed.

She was mounted upon rollers, ready to emerge into the air.

During her construction none but the workmen and artisans had been allowed to enter or to view her.

Now, however, Frank had issued cards of invitation to the leading men of Readestown, and the Cloud Cutter was to be open for inspection for a couple of hours before the sailing time.

It need hardly be said that the offer had been accepted, and the fortunate ones were on hand at the appointed time.

It was a wonderful sight the visitors beheld as they were admitted to the machine shop yard through a gate in the high brick wall.

There before them was the famous airship, a wonderful specimen of symmetry and beauty of outline as well as detail and finish.

The Cloud Cutter was built somewhat upon the lines of a trim schooner and was extremely buoyant.

Her hull was of thin aluminum, the lightest of metal, and yet was bullet-proof.

A long cabin extended from stem to stern. This was provided with plate glass windows. The deck all around the vessel was guarded with a hand-rail of brass.

Four masts or revolving shafts rose from her deck, upon the top of each there being a powerful rotascope which furnished the power of suspension in air.

Aft was a large propeller, similar to those in use upon seagoing vessels, only of course much lighter and longer.

The rotascopes and the propeller were run at powerful speed by electric engines, the construction and operation of which were a secret of Frank's.

The cabin was elegantly furnished and equipped with all manner of wonderful devices.

Perhaps the most important of these were the chemical generators of fresh oxygen and their distributing tubes.

For Frank had announced his purpose of ascending in the atmosphere as far as it was practically safe to get as good a view as possible of the comet.

There has always been a division of opinion as to the material of which a comet's tail is composed.

Some learned men have claimed that it is constructed of a train of fiery sparks or burning gases thrown off by the comet in its furious friction through space.

Others have maintained that the tail can be nothing but a brilliant nebulous volume without any heat whatever, as there could be no friction in utter space to develop a fierce light.

In fact, theories as to the composition of the comet and its tail have always been as plentiful as flies in August. It is safe to say the truth was unknown.

But Frank Reade, Jr., declared:

"If the thing is possible, I am going to get near enough to the comet's tail to decide of what material it is really made."

"Faith, an' he's the bye to do it," cried Barney.

"Right yo' is, I'ish," agreed Pomp.

Worthy object! But what a daring scheme! To say that it was without risk would be folly.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was not one to take back tracks. When he made up his mind to go ahead upon a given course he was very resolute.

So he had provided for the possible sojourn of the airship in a part of the atmosphere, or even in space, where human life could not be supported for lack of proper materials.

He knew that the chemical generators could supply pure oxygen indefinitely, for he had used them in his submarine boat at the bottom of the sea.

The cabin doors and windows could be hermetically sealed, and thus the inmates need fear nothing from poisonous gases or suffocation. Indeed it was a wonderful device.

We have given a meager description of the Cloud Cutter. The reader will learn more of its construction and details in the course of the narrative. So with a kind permission we will pass on to the exciting events of our story.

And when we bear in mind the object of the trip, that they cannot be otherwise than exciting the reader will agree.

That three daring spirits should venture to journey to the Antarctic in an airship and then mount miles and miles into the upper regions of the atmosphere, even to its limits to incur the risk of a buffet from the tail of the Comet of Verdi seems incredible.

Yet to what thrilling lengths the adventure was carried and what exciting experiences befell our adventurers we shall now proceed to relate.

CHAPTER II.

UNDER WAY—THE SHIP IN DISTRESS.

"Begorra, Misther Frank, it's a black-lookin' say down there. Shure, the waves look ugly enough."

It was Barney O'Shea who spoke, and at the moment he stood upon the deck of the airship, which hovered full a thousand feet in midair over the waters of the heaving South Atlantic.

The Cloud Cutter was a full month upon her southern voyage, and thus far all had been propitious.

It had been a delightful experience sailing in midair that long distance.

But as the Equatorial seas and clime were left behind, the dark, tempestuous waste of the South Atlantic brought a dismal sense of depression and foreboding.

The winds were all head winds and exceedingly strong. The sky was much overcast, and the air chill and raw.

Overcoats were most comfortable, and the electric heater in the cabin was put into operation.

The voyagers were now looking forward with deep interest to the end of their cruise, or at least the reaching of the point on the Antarctic continent from whence the flight into upper atmosphere was to be taken.

The exclamation by Barney, with which this chapter opens, was indeed well warranted.

The sea did look black and ugly, and the waves ran high.

Upon the horizon black clouds hung low. There was every indication of a hurricane.

Night was coming on rapidly, and such a storm in those latitudes was much to be dreaded.

"You are right, Barney," declared Frank; "the sea looks forbidding. It is fortunate that we are sailing in the air instead of upon the water."

"Golly, Marse Frank," cried Pomp. "I done fink dere am somebody ober yender sailin' on de watah."

Pomp pointed to the low horizon where a speck of white was just visible.

That it was a sail there was no doubt.

"A sail!" exclaimed Frank. "Vessels are not plenty in these latitudes."

"Begorra, phwat koind av a craft can it be?" asked Barney.

"Perhaps a sealer," said Frank "or maybe a South Sea trader a bit off his course. In any event they will have a rough night of it."

"That's thrue, sor."

Darkness now began to settle down rapidly. The wind blew so powerful that the airship could not more than keep its course, to say nothing of making any progress.

So Barney set the steering lever and left the pilot-house to join Frank and Pomp at the evening meal.

This was served up as only Pomp knew how to serve it, with everything warm and appetizing.

It was cozy and warm in the cabin. The wind and rain beat tempestuously against the heavy plate glass windows.

At times vivid lightning flashes dispelled the blackness, and the roll of distant thunder was plain.

But the aerial voyagers felt secure and snug in the cabin of the Cloud Cutter.

To be sure the airship pitched and heaved some, but this was not to their discomfort.

After the meal was over Pomp brought out his banjo and sang and played lively plantation ditties.

Then Barney, to furnish his quota, produced a genuine Irish fiddle.

He was a master at manipulating the bow, and rendered all the Irish airs he could think of.

Frank lit a fragrant Havana, and leaning back, enjoyed the sport.

Barney and Pomp were always a fund of entertainment.

Thus the hours passed pleasantly.

It must have been near midnight when, as the storm seemed to wax fiercer, a distant boom was heard.

"Phwat was that?" cried Barney, springing up.

"I reckon it was thunder; dat am all," said Pomp.

"No," said Frank. "It was a signal gun."

"Begorra, that's phwat I think, too, sor," cried Barney. "Shure, somebody is in thrubble."

"Huh! Whoeber could be in trubble in dis lonesome paht ob de world?" said Pomp, incredulously.

But Frank had sprung into the pilot-house.

He gazed downward through the black waste. Then he gave a great cry and a start.

"Mercy on us! There is a ship in distress down there!"

All that could be seen in the darkness was a star of light far below.

But Frank knew that it was a ship's binnacle, and that the signal gun meant that the craft was in distress.

He instantly turned the searchlight on and sent its glare downward.

She was literally at the mercy of the fierce elements.

It was of course impossible to tell what class of vessel she was or what the cause of her distress, though it was undoubtedly the heavy sea.

On her deck a number of forms were seen clinging to the bulwarks, and the gun which had been fired was seen to be a swivel bow gun.

"Begorra, it's a ship!" cried Barney, excitedly. "Shure, Misther Frank, it's sinkin' they'll be!"

"She cannot outlive such a fearful hurricane!" said Frank, excitedly. "There are some of the crew on her deck! We must help them!"

"Golly, Marse Frank! howeber can we do dat?"

"There must be a way," replied Frank. "We must find a way!"

"Bejabers, that's the koind av talk I loike!" cried Barney. "I'm wid yez, Misther Frank!"

"Wha' am we gwine to do, Marse Frank?" asked Pomp.

But Frank had already made action.

He pressed the keys on the switchboard and the airship began to descend. Down she went until she hovered directly over the doomed vessel.

It was by no means easy to keep her in this position.

But steady work at the propeller and rudder kept her fairly steady. Then Frank pulled off his coat. He picked up a coil of rope and started for the deck.

But Barney intercepted him.

"Where air yez goin', Misther Frank?" asked the Celt.

"Somebody has got to go down there and rescue those people," declared the young inventor.

"Shure, yez are not afther goin' yersilf alone?"

"Yes."

"Divil a bit, Misther Frank. I'm the man fer that job. Shure it's a dandy I am at climbin' a rope."

Frank knew this and hesitated.

"Are you not afraid to go?" he asked.

"Not me, sor."

"Well," said Frank, suddenly, "you shall go, for I am sure you are a better sailor than I am. Throw the rope over and slide down. When just over the deck, drop! But be sure and hold the end of the rope all the while."

"Lave me alone fer that, sor."

"There will be great risk. If you feel at all timid, don't go."

"Divil a bit, sor."

So over the rail went the rope.

A moment later Barney followed.

The Celt was a splendid sailor and perfectly at home on a rope. He was swung wildly in the tempestuous air like a pendulum.

The cold was most bitter, and seemed to turn his hands and limbs to ice.

But he did not flinch and kept on down to the end of the rope.

Frank was in the pilot-house and watching him closely.

At the right moment the young inventor moved the airship to the right position, and the Celt swung aboard the wreck.

Plenty of slack was given to the line, so that there was no danger of Barney being dragged overboard. Then those on board the airship watched intently the scene which ensued.

It was certainly a daring feat for the Celt to perform. But success seemed to wait upon him.

As he struck the deck of the derelict ship he saw only three persons aboard her.

One of these was a beautiful young girl, who was lashed to the foremast to prevent her being washed overboard.

The other was a tall and handsome youth, who was by the signal gun, and the third was a man of middle age, with a sharp, cadaverous cast of features and a goatee beard.

As Barney struck the deck of the sinking ship the two men rushed to his side.

"Gol durn my butes!" cried the middle-aged man. "Did yew cum frum Parydise or air yew an angel?"

"Are we dreaming?" cried the tall youth. "You certainly came down from the clouds?"

"Yez air roight!" cried Barney; "I cum down from Misther Frank Reade, Jr.'s airship."

"An airship!" cried the youth. "Is it possible? Hurrah, Jeptha, we are saved!"

"Airship?" ejaculated the Yankee, for such he was; "chew me fer sassyfras, but I'm busted! Whar in tarnation should an airship cum from? I tell yew we air dreamin'!"

"Yez will be dhramin' wid the mermaids pooty quick av yez don't git a move on!" cried Barney. "Shure, yer ould craft is sinkin' fast!"

"We know that well, sir," cried the youth, excitedly; "but have you really come to rescue us?"

"I have that, sor."

"And we are to go aboard your airship?"

"Yis, sor."

"Will wonders never cease? So aerial navigation is an established fact. But how in time are we to get up there, my good Irishman?"

"Shure that's aisy enough. Jist catch onto this rope an' they'll pull yez up aisy."

The youth with a sharp cry turned to the side of the young girl who was lashed to the mast.

"Estelle, my darling," he cried, "we are saved! Our prayers are answered and Providence has come to our rescue!"

"Thank God for that!" cried the young girl, fervently. "I felt sure it was not for us to die in this dreadful way! Alas for our poor lost companions!"

"God rest their souls! But come, you shall be the first to go aboard the airship."

The Cloud Cutter's outlines even could not be seen for the glare of the searchlight.

But the imperilled survivors of the drifting wreck could not afford to ask questions.

They simply accepted Barney's word and adopted quickly the only means of rescue which was offered them.

CHAPTER III.

SOME NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

The rope was very quickly passed about the waist of the young girl, and Barney signaled to Frank in the pilot-house above.

Up went the slender form of the young girl, swaying in the tempest until the rail of the Cloud Cutter was reached.

Then Pomp quickly lifted her aboard.

Jeptha Jones, the Yankee, next followed. Then the youth, and Barney last of all.

Without mishap they all reached the deck of the Cloud Cutter.

It was not a moment too soon.

They had barely drawn Barney aboard when the derelict craft gave a great lurch and went down into the black sea.

Into the cabin of the airship the rescued trio went.

Frank Reade, Jr., met them smiling and said:

"Welcome to the Cloud Cutter. You are safe now, but it was a narrow escape which you had."

"Indeed it was," replied the youth, readily. "We had about abandoned hope, and even now must regard our delivery as miraculous."

"Well, yes," said Frank. "We happened along in just the right time."

"I should say so. But what a wonderful invention this is. It is the first and only airship I have ever seen."

"I am inclined to believe that they are not common," said Frank with a smile. "But make yourselves at home while aboard the Cloud Cutter."

"A thousand thanks. But pardon me. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Clarence Connell, a botanical student from the Society of Science, in Brooklyn, New York."

"Glad to meet you, sir. I am Frank Reade, Jr."

"So I imagined. This is the daughter of our lamented Captain Layton, who died at sea about six weeks ago, and since whose loss we have been quite lost upon the ocean. This is Miss Estelle Layton."

"I am honored to be of such valued service;" said Frank, gallantly.

A few pleasant remarks followed, then the young lady retired to her stateroom, which Pomp had prepared for her.

Meanwhile Jeptha and Barney had been having a great confab, the Yankee putting his native wit against that of the Irishman.

Frank and Clarence Connell went into the forward cabin, where the youth told the story of their troubles.

The Primrose was a fine East Indiaman, hailing from New York, and under the care of Captain Silas Layton, a thorough seaman.

The only passengers aboard her were the captain's fair daughter, Estelle, Clarence Connell, the botanical student, and Jeptha Jones.

Jeptha had come aboard at Auckland, and was returning to New England with a comfortable fortune amassed in the wonderful new country of New Zealand.

All went well during the cruise until one day Captain Layton fell violently ill.

The next day he was dead, and the following day was buried at sea.

It was a fearful blow to Estelle.

The mate who now took charge of the ship was a wretched navigator and missed his reckoning.

The Primrose drifted south almost into the Antarctic. Then the great storm came on.

When the hurricane first attacked the Primrose it put her onto her beam ends.

The hatches were next battened down, and Connell and Jones, with Estelle, were confined in the cabin.

Terrific seas broke over the ship. Her masts were heard to fall, and then Connell decided to break the hatches and go on deck.

When he did so he was overwhelmed with horror.

The Primrose was a shattered wreck, and every one of her crew had gone.

Washed overboard by the fearful seas, terrible indeed had been their fate!

Words cannot express the sensation of the trio of survivors, and they had abandoned all hope when deliverance came.

But now Frank was in turn plunged into a quandary.

He told Connell of the object of the trip, which was to see the approach of the comet, and the latter was intensely interested.

But Frank knew that the time was scant, and was at a loss to know what to do with his three new passengers.

He did not see how he could spare the time to take them to the Australian continent, yet he could not let them drown.

He had just about time enough left in which to make his objective point.

This he must accomplish at all hazards. But what should he do with the shipwrecked people?

Finally it was agreed that he should leave them upon Kerguelen until his return from the Pole.

Before day came the storm had spent its fury and the voyagers all retired for a much-needed bit of sleep.

However, it was early in the day that they were all astir again, and as they emerged on deck it was a remarkable spectacle which they beheld.

Below was a monster iceberg many thousands of feet in circumference. Its pinnacles and turrets looked like silver in the morning light.

The spirits of all arose as the sun for a brief time showed itself.

But sunlight in this desolate part of the world is a rare quantity, and Old Sol soon hid his face under a bank of gray clouds.

Frank sniffed the air and said dubiously:

"The storm is not over yet. It will recur again. The barometer shows that."

"Mercy on us!" cried Connell; "don't give us any such bitter news as that, Frank. I hope we will have no more such experiences."

Jeptha Jones, the Yankee, could not get over his wonderment and admiration of the airship.

"Wall, now, it does beat Jemima!" he declared; "that wuz Dan Scribner's boy daown in Maine as made a wooden bottle with a jumpin' jack inside uv it, an' how he got ther jack intew ther bottle yew cudn't tell, for nobody cud git it aout, ther bottle neck wuz so small. That wuz ingenuity, but it ain't a candle tew this air flyin' ship. I wisht my my wife Sally cud see it. She'd hev a fit on ther spot!"

"Well, Mr. Jones," said Frank in surprise, "you would not want your wife to have a fit, would you?"

Jeptha cleared his throat.

"Hum! reckon you ain't never been daown tew Pinhook, Maine? Wall, anybody daown thar kin tell yew abaout my wife, Sally. Yew see we didn't marry fer love, we didn't, an' these 'ere marriages uv convenience ain't ther stayin' quality. Naow she's jest waitin tew hear thet I've turned

up my toes in some furrin land so's she kin ketch onter Jim Spruce as keeps ther corner grocery. Oh, I'm right onto it, yew kin bet yure copper toes."

Everybody smiled audibly.

"And what would you do, Jeptha, if your wife had a fit and didn't come out of it?" asked Connell, jocularly.

The Yankee's shrewd eyes twinkled.

"Oh, thar's Sam Harkin's widder, as owns ther Ten Mile Meadows. She's waitin' fer me an' I'm jest ther huckleberry kin make her happy. Oh, thar's nothin' like love. Young man, when yew marry, marry fer ther divine inspirashun of love."

And Jeptha cast a sidelong glance at Estelle, which brought the color into her pale but lovely face.

The truth was that during the stormy voyage of the Primrose Connell had fallen in love with the captain's daughter. Their hearts flowed easily together and they were happily engaged.

Barney and Pomp took Jeptha in tow.

The three were inveterate wags and the air at once became redolent with spicy jokes and side-splitting comments.

The airship was now making fairly rapid way to the westward in the direction of Kerguelen.

Here the shipwrecked people were to remain until the airship had made its inspection of the great comet.

"If we come back alive," said Frank. "Of course there is always that chance. Something may happen to us on this hazardous trip."

"In that case our position will be an unenviable one," said Clarence. "There is little on Kerguelen to support human life."

"Yet you could exist until some passing vessel——"

"Ah, Kerguelen is seldom visited by ships," said Clarence. "However, we will believe in your safe return. Ah, what was that?"

Both men sprang up. A little scream came from the lips of Estelle, who came out of her stateroom in something of alarm.

CHAPTER IV.

A CHANGE OF PLANS.

"What has happened?" was Clarence Connell's exclamation. He and Frank instantly sprang out upon deck.

A terrific booming sound filled the air. It was the roar of many far distant thunders.

Yet the only cloud in sight was an inky, low-lying bank upon the horizon.

"Was it thunder?" exclaimed Clarence. "It cannot be. Those clouds are too far away."

"Ah, you forget," replied Frank. "We are in a part of the world replete with strange phenomena. That was thunder, and its reverberation in this rarefied air will travel a great ways, I tell you."

"Can it be possible? Then it must be indication of another storm."

"And close at hand, too."

"What? Will we not be able to reach Kerguelen first?"

"No. I am afraid that you will never see Kerguelen."

Astounded, Connell turned and regarded Frank, to see if he really spoke with seriousness.

But there was no doubt of this.

"We will never see Kerguelen? Oh, you think the ship will never be able to weather the storm?"

"Quite the contrary," said Frank. "You see, we must reach the Antarctic Continent within a very few days, or we shall be too late to connect with the comet."

"Oh!"

"If we are delayed by this storm we shall not have time to give you a landing."

Connell looked at Frank.

"Why is it necessary, anyway?" he said. "Would we hamper you by our presence?"

"By no means," said Frank. "But the risk we will take——"

"Hang your risk! I am more than willing to go with you, and I am sure that Estelle is the same. As for Jeptha, he would never kick."

Frank drew a breath of relief.

"Then it is settled," he said. "I will lose no further time. We will run before the storm as rapidly as possible. About ship, Barney!"

"Ay, ay, sor!"

The Cloud Cutter's course was instantly changed.

The three newcomers were to be among those involved in the strange and awful experience of the near future.

Frank sent the Cloud Cutter on at a furious speed in the hopes of outrunning the storm.

One hundred miles was covered in quick time.

This cleared the full force of the hurricane, but drove the airship into a terrific snow storm.

It really seemed as if the snow was banked solidly in the atmosphere and the airship was literally imbedded in it.

The danger became apparent and imminent.

The snow banked upon the deck of the Cloud Cutter with

tremendous weight. It sifted into the rotascope flanges and threatened to completely check the progress of the ship.

Here was a predicament and an emergency little counted upon.

But Frank was not slow in devising a plan to meet the new order of things.

"There is but one thing that we can do," he said, decidedly.

"And that?" asked Connell.

"We must either descend and rest upon the water or ascend above this storm."

"Can we ascend above it?"

"Certainly; but the cold up there would be frightful and the air so extremely rare as to forbid the supporting of human life. On the other hand it is doubtful if the airship could stand the buffeting of the waves below."

"Whew!" exclaimed Connell; "I don't see how we can adopt either of those alternatives."

"Oh, yes we can."

"Which one?"

"We can ascend above the storm," said Frank.

"But you say that human life could not be supported up there."

"Not if one exposed himself."

"But how can we do otherwise?"

With this Frank explained the mechanism of the chemical generators on board the airship.

Young Connell was immensely interested and expressed himself in unmeasured terms of wonderment.

"You are the most wonderful man of this age, Mr. Reade!" he said.

"That is a strong statement," protested Frank.

The young inventor had decided upon what he believed to be the proper move and hastened to execute it.

The airship was sent upward through the snow storm.

Up and up it slowly rose, it being a difficult matter, to be sure, under such a weight of snow.

But soon the falling snow began to grow less, and eventually ceased altogether.

The mighty blue vault of heaven burst into view, frightfully clear and cold. They were above the storm.

Every window and door was hermetically sealed, so that no cold could get in, and the chemical generators furnished sufficient oxygen for the voyagers.

The blue dome above twinkled with a myriad of stars. Below the blackness of Styx reigned.

Not one of the voyagers but felt a thrill of relief. Yet none dared to go out on deck for the purpose of getting rid of the fearful mass of snow there collected.

It would have been instant suffocation, Frank declared, to have ventured out there.

The airship hovered for hours over the black storm which raged below.

Then, as a bank of clouds in the extreme south cleared away, Frank gave a great shout.

"The comet!"

Instantly all sprang into the pilot-house.

A wonderful spectacle rewarded the gaze of all.

"The comet it is!" cried Connell. "Heavens! what a monster!"

There hung on the southern horizon what might have been taken for a second moon but for the confused radiance about it, and streaming from it far into space in the shape of the tail.

They were at that moment accorded a view of the comet which no other inhabitant of the earth could rejoice in.

The mighty heavenly body, which to friends at home in America might at that moment seem a trifle larger than one of the planets, was to our voyagers fully the size of the moon.

It was evident that the comet was approaching the earth at a furious speed.

It was yet many millions of miles away, but despite this would make its influence felt on the earth.

It looked at the moment as if its declension involved a certain collision with the earth.

But Frank knew better than this, and said:

"It will speed by the earth at an abrupt angle, but its tail will come very near to us."

The most powerful glasses Frank had were brought to bear upon the comet.

However, nothing could be determined as to its actual composition, save that it seemed to be a ball of fire and shooting out great volumes of vapor in its wake, which, uniting with other elements in space, formed the nebulous tail.

The voyagers watched the comet until it paled in the radiance of the rising sun.

Then Frank checked the speed of the rotascopes and the airship began to fall.

Down it went with great rapidity until at length it was immersed in a bank of clouds.

Emerging from this the earth was seen far below. They had ascended to a frightful altitude.

"Wall, I swan!" remarked Jeptha, when Mother Earth came into view again. "Thar's nobody in Pinhook will believe what I tell 'em when I git tew hum. It beats all my relashuns!"

"Begorra, that must be sayin' a good deal, sor," said Barney, with a twinkle of his eyes.

"'Tain't everybody thet hes relashuns of enny kind," declared Jeptha, imperturbably. "Some people kain't tell what they sprung up frum. My uncle's nephew's people cum over in ther Mayflower."

"Begorra, that's aisy," said Barney, unctuously; "the O'Sheas are related by marriage wid the Borus, an' they wor the fust kings of Oireland!"

"Kings ain't trumps in this kentry," snuffed Jeptha.

"Nor Jacks ayther," retorted Barney, whereat the Yankee walked disdainfully away.

Pomp was in the galley singing something about the eternal and never-dying "Yaller Gal."

Now that he had disposed of Jeptha Barney thought he would settle a score with the darky.

So he sauntered into the galley and said casually:

"Naygur, kin yez tell me why that comet is loike a kangaroo?"

"Hi, dar, I'ish; I done gib dat up. Kain't see de leastest bit ob a resemblyance."

"Well, there is, me fri'nd."

"Maybe yo' kin tell why de comet am like a kangaroo."

"Bejabers, that's aisy."

"Why am it, den?"

"Begorra, the comet is afther havin' a big tail and so has the kangaroo."

Pomp wheeled about, and with marvelous aim sent a fistful of soft dough at the luckless punster. Barney's mouth had just opened for a laugh, and the sticky mass went half down his throat.

"Ugh—gurgle—guf—haw—ker—chew!"

Spluttering and gasping the Celt nearly turned a back somersault. It was Pomp's inning, and he nearly split himself with laughter.

As it happened Jeptha had witnessed the Celt's discomfiture, and he also joined in the uproar.

It was one against the Celt, but he took his medicine like a man and ingloriously beat a retreat.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE ANTARCTIC COUNTRY.

As the Antarctic Continent was now near at hand the days began to shorten very perceptibly, for it was the season of the Antarctic winter or night of six months' duration.

"A few hundred miles further," said Frank, "and we shall lose the sun altogether."

"That will bring the comet perpetually in view," said Connell.

"Yes."

Gradually the airship cut down the distance across the mighty Antarctic Ocean.

Frank made his reckoning with great care.

He calculated that they would reach the necessary point on the Antarctic Continent in good season to intercept the comet.

The sea had now begun to assume a vastly different aspect.

There were immense icebergs, and one day far to the southward there were seen the fields which all knew bordered upon the great Antarctic world.

That world of snow and ice of which so little was known, and which was to the world a region of mystery.

It was a thrilling thought to the aerial voyagers that they were to be the fortunate ones to view this mystic and unexplored part of the earth.

The sun was now visible only a few moments each day upon the horizon.

There was no absolute darkness, but a dense gloom, which was only relieved by the stars and the light of the comet.

This had increased immensely in size and seemed vastly near the earth.

Connell had become immensely interested in the affair, and constantly watched the comet.

"This is a source of delight to me," he declared. "It was always my desire to become an astronomer, and now Fate has given me an opportunity which no living astronomer has ever been fortunate enough to secure."

The ice-packs now lay beneath the airship.

For many miles these were crossed, and then Frank from the pilot-house shouted:

"Land ho!"

In an instant there was a scramble to the windows.

Sure enough, there was unmistakably a coast line to the southward.

It was a white, snow-bound shore, but nevertheless a continent.

All was excitement.

Steadily the airship now approached that wonderful land of the South Pole.

Connell and Barney ventured out on deck.

The thermometer registered sixty degrees below zero. The cold was frightful.

But they had prepared for it.

They wore immense fur garments or they could not have withstood it a moment.

The scene now spread to view was wonderful.

The shore line was rough and faced with high cliffs, some of these fully a thousand feet high.

Inland there were terrific high snow-capped mountains. Some of these were plainly volcanoes.

"The Antarctic Continent!" exclaimed Frank. "It is supposed to be uninhabited."

"But there are traditions of a volcanic region of great warmth beyond this snow and ice belt," said Connell.

"It may be true," said Frank. "I would much like to penetrate thither."

"We may never get a better opportunity."

"Ah, the opportunity is lacking."

"How so?"

"It is easy to see. If we go off now on an exploring expedition we shall miss connection with the comet."

"Ah, how soon shall we make that connection?"

"Within two days."

"That settles it," agreed Connell. "Of course the object of your trip here is to connect with the comet. I have nothing more to say."

"But I'll tell you what we will do."

"What?"

"If we return safely to this spot after viewing the comet at near range, we will then continue our exploration of the South Pole."

"Good!" cried Connell, with delight.

The airship had been constantly in the air for many months. As her engines had during this time had no rest, Frank decided to avail himself of an opportunity for giving them a slight overhauling.

So he selected a good spot upon the summit of a snow-clad hill and allowed the airship to descend.

She rested upon the frozen snow lightly. An anchor was thrown out and all was secure.

The cold here was by no means so intense, and the voyagers, clad in furs, were comfortably able to emerge upon deck.

It was even proposed to take a little exploring trip across the frozen snow.

Frank and Barney were busy with overhauling the machinery.

But there were Pomp and Jeptha to accompany Clarence, and just as they were getting ready to go a slight form came nestling up to Clarence and a sweet voice said:

"May I not go with you, Clarence? Don't leave me behind."

"You!" exclaimed Connell, in surprise, as he looked down into his sweetheart's face. "Why, Estelle, it is not safe."

"Not safe!" she exclaimed with spirit. "Pray what is the danger?"

"Well, we may fall in with wild beasts or get into a crevasse, or—or many other things may befall us."

"Don't fear," said Estelle, with a light laugh. "I have used a rifle often, and I am strong and can tramp a good ways."

She was well shielded with furs, and Connell could not help but yield.

"Of course it will delight me," he said. "I was only thinking of the risk to you."

This settled it.

The young girl in her delight ran for her equipments. Estelle Layton was not like the average girl.

She was well used to a rough life, for her father before taking to the sea had roughed it upon the plains in Indian days.

It was there that Estelle had been taught the use of firearms. She was a fearless girl.

The party was soon ready.

Frank and Barney paused in their work long enough to see them off and wish them luck.

"We will bring back some furs, at all events," cried Connell.

"I hope you will," said Frank.

It was easy enough to walk upon the frozen snow, and the party made their way easily along to the foot of the eminence.

Here they entered a deep cut which led through some snow-clad hills.

The deep gloom which rested upon the landscape was not at all inspiring to the nerves.

All corners and crevices, as well as angles in the defile, were filled with dark shadows, suggestive of hobgoblins and fiends of darkness.

What sorts of wild beasts might be in hiding in these covert places Clarence had no means of knowing.

But he kept a sharp lookout.

Pomp's eyes were like full moons, and his kinky hair was right on end.

"Dis am a bery likely place for ghosteses," he remarked. "Kain't say as I wud jes' like fo' to stay about yere all night."

"Wall, I swar tew man," roared Jeptha. "Yew don't believe in ghosts an' sich things, dew yew?"

"I mus' say I does, sah!"

"Did yew ever see one?"

"Heaps ob dem! Red an' black an' yaller ones!"

"Hum!" ejaculated Jeptha, stroking his goatee. "Whar-ever did yew see sich things as that?"

"Oh, down in Georgy. Why, sah, when I was a lily boy I used to lib near a grabeyard. All yo' had to do was to jes' go out dar at twelve o'clock, an' fo' de Lor' yo' jes' shake yo'se'f out ob yo' shoes to see the ghosteses dancin' in de moonlight. Huh! does I beliebe in ghosteses? Well, I jes' fink I does!"

Estelle laughed merrily at this yarn of the darky's.

They had now emerged from the shadowy pass into a valley beyond. Suddenly some dark forms were seen skurrying across the snow.

"Foxes!" cried Connell.

With which he raised his rifle and fired. One of the animals fell in a heap.

It was a beautiful species of fox, with black, silky fur. Estelle admired it, and Clarence said:

"You shall have it for a muff. Surely no lady in America can boast a finer."

"That will be delightful!" cried the young girl, with glowing cheeks. "Oh, this is very exciting; I must try a shot at something myself."

"Why, of course," said Clarence. "If we see a penguin——"

"A penguin!" exclaimed Estelle in scorn. "I want bigger game than that, if you please. Ah, look out!"

Quick as a flash she threw up her rifle and fired at a distant shadowy form.

There was a fierce yelp, and a yell of agony. Then all ran to the spot.

The animal had been shot through the heart.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Connell, "you are the best shot in the party!"

"I told you I would bag something," said Estelle, with sparkling eyes. "And it is no fox, either."

This was seen to be a fact.

The animal was a rare species of ice wolf found only in the Antarctic. Its fur was of the greatest value, his pelt being worth in London fully fifty pounds sterling.

It was certainly a happy moment for all.

CHAPTER VI.

TO THE LIMIT OF THE ATMOSPHERE.

Estelle had certainly distinguished herself. She was beyond doubt the crack shot of the party.

Pomp quickly flayed the two animals and bundled up the pelts.

Then the party went on.

But they had not made a hundred yards when they came to a dense growth of Arctic firs.

From the branches of these a peculiar heavy moss fell. It was a picturesque sight.

But the sequel was at hand of a thrilling nature.

Suddenly from the fir forest there emerged a shape the like of which none in the party had ever seen.

Its body was of immense height. its head being fully fifteen feet from the ground. Its body was elephantine in size.

Great antlers, yards in width, shot out from its head, and its eyes glowed like balls of fire in the gloom.

It was to all appearance an animal of the elk species, but a literal giant in size. It was full double the size of the ordinary moose.

Its attitude was most terrifying, and the hunters stood for a moment spellbound.

"A giant elk!" gasped Connell. "It is kin to an antediluvian race long since extinct in other parts of the earth."

"Jerusha! I reckon we'd better be abaout makin' ourselves skurce!" gritted Jeptha.

"Golly, it am a drefful-lookin' critter," chattered Pomp.

Estelle had cocked her rifle and was waiting the action of the others.

The giant elk stood for a moment regarding them in a curious way. Then it emitted a bellow which was like a lion's roar.

Jeptha went scurrying across the valley with long, flying leaps. He did not care to court a combat with such an animal.

"Steady," said Connell, in a low, tense voice. "Keep behind me, Estelle. If the beast attacks run for your life."

The young girl's lip curled.

"That would be a coward's trick," she said. "Leave me to myself."

"Look out dar!" screamed Pomp. "He am comin'!"

This was true.

The giant elk had lowered its horns and had started in a plunging way for the hunters.

"Steady!" cried Connell. "Now fire all together!"

Crack-ack!

Crack!

The three rifles spoke. But the elk came on.

Connell thought only of Estelle at that moment. He was ready to give his life for hers.

So he rushed in front of the maddened creature and fired again almost point blank.

The next thing he remembered was being hustled along over the snow and then tossed in the air.

Then he had a vision of terrible horns and beating hoofs, and then a current of something warm and liquid suffused his face and a heavy form fell over him.

With difficulty he extricated himself only to hear a thrilled and agonized voice in his ear.

"Oh, he is killed—he is dead! It is too late!"

"No, no, Estelle!" he cried joyfully, springing up. "I am not even hurt."

Then he saw the dead elk at his feet. Its life blood had splashed all over him.

Estelle was happy in his arms.

Pomp came rushing up.

"Fo' de Lor', sah, yo' wud hab been a dead man now but fo' dat gal!"

"What! Did you fire the shot which killed the elk, Estelle?" he asked in amazement.

"I did," she answered faintly.

"And you saved my life! Truly, you are the better hunter of us all. The giant's antlers shall be mounted and inscribed with your name. But come, I have had enough hunting for to-day; how is it with the rest of you?"

"I swar tew man!" exclaimed Jeptha, who had ventured to return; "I am of ther candid 'pinyun we'd better git back tew ther airship. We might meet a b'ar next."

All laughed at this and Pomp had to poke some fun at the shivering Yankee.

"Ob co'se yo' cudn't bear dat," he remarked.

"Naow yew kin talk, nigger," sniffed Jeptha; "but yew war durned afraid of that elk yourself."

"But I didn't run away, jes' de same," ventured Pomp.

"Mebbe yew were too skeered an' hadn't ther courage tew run," declared Jeptha.

At which sage conclusion all roared uproariously. However, the party started on the return to the airship.

Pomp had removed the head and antlers of the elk. They were a big load for him, with Jeptha's aid.

Nothing more befell them, and they reached the airship safely enough.

Barney and Frank were still at work on the machinery.

The hour for the start was rapidly drawing nigh.

As it did so the excitement of the voyagers waxed more intense.

The comet was studied assiduously.

It seemed as if the huge monster was now directly overhead and sweeping rapidly to the northward.

But Frank said:

"It is leaving the earth. From this hour it will constantly decrease in size and finally fade from sight altogether."

At length the moment came for the start zenithward.

The voyagers all congregated in the pilot-house.

The doors and windows were hermetically sealed.

The chemical generators were working.

Upward sprang the airship.

The great trip was begun.

Up and up it went—higher and higher! Frost began to form on the windows, so intensely cold was it. But the voyagers were not at all uncomfortable in the cabin.

To look back at the earth nothing could be seen but a dark blur. Soon they were in a cloud which hid everything from view.

From one fleecy bank of clouds to another the airship went.

Rain in great quantities was precipitated upon the deck. It was a moist time until suddenly the Cloud Cutter cleared all and floated in a clear sky.

Frank looked at the gauge.

"We are forty miles from the earth," he said.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Connell, "I would not care to drop that distance."

"Great heifers!" ejaculated Jeptha. "Yew don't mean to say we are forty miles from the airth?"

"Yes, I do," replied Frank.

"In a straight line?"

"In the straightest kind of a line."

"Durn my oats! Air yew sure we kin git back ag'in?"

"Dead sure of it," said Frank, grimly. "If any part of the machinery should break we would go back in about four minutes."

"Whew!" gasped Jeptha; "forty miles in four minutes?"

"About that."

"Don't yew let this airship fall, or by gum! yew will kill the hull on us, an' that wud be murder, an' yew'd likely hang fer it."

Everybody laughed at this.

Pretty Estelle Layton asked:

"About how far do you reckon it is to the limit of the atmosphere, or the point where it merges into space?"

"The distance may vary," said Frank, "but I compute it at from one to three hundred miles."

"Mercy! And are we likely to go that far from the earth?"

Frank smiled complacently.

But Estelle and the others felt their hair literally rise on end.

It was surely an appalling thought. Only the steadiest of nerve must compensate for the strain.

The three castaways were white as chalk. To think that they were so far from things mundane was certainly a reflection of no light sort. The sensation cannot be described.

Few have experienced it.

Barney and Pomp had too much faith in Frank Reade, Jr., to feel the least particle of fear.

"Don' yo' fret," declared Pomp, confidently. "Marse Frank, he neber get beat yet. If de airship done go to pieces, he find a way to git us back all safe, yo' bet!"

This was certainly a high quality of faith. The others, however, could not quite reconcile themselves to this hopeful view.

But Barney said:

"Begorra, the way I do, I never think av the earth, an' be me sowl! I'm not afraid av fallin'. Fergit all about it, I tell yez."

"That will soon become second nature to you," said Frank. "You will overcome your fright in a short while. There is little possibility of returning to the earth except at our leisure."

Frank's prediction was verified.

In a short while the nerves of all became more composed. As he declared, all forgot the fearful possibility of a drop to the earth.

They were too absorbed in watching the strange occurrences around them.

Still the Cloud Cutter kept speeding upward.

A great distance had been covered.

The observations which it was now possible to make were certainly wonderful beyond all power of description.

The planets seemed nearer and clearer, and the telescope revealed many peculiar facts about them which apparently had not been known before.

The comet seemed to loom up ten times larger than the moon, and to the westward there was a dull, nebulous haze which seemed to obstruct all view in that quarter.

"That is the comet's tail," said Frank; "it is my opinion that it has already swept downward into the atmosphere and that we are to feel its influence. I am curious to know what it can be."

"It cannot be that the comet's tail is of fire, after all?" cried Connell.

"I have never thought so," declared Frank. "Ah, what is that? Stand to the wheel, Barney!"

An incident occurred at that moment which well warranted Frank's excited exclamation.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE COMET'S TAIL.

There was a sudden and instant commotion in the air. The airship began to sway and rock violently.

The nebulous cloud had with the swiftness of the wind closed about the airship. It was as if some strange, irresistible element heavier than water had seized it.

Then what followed was for some while only a vague memory.

It seemed as if giant hands seized the Cloud Cutter, and it was borne on into space while utter darkness succeeded.

The voyagers were all thrown from their feet by the violence of the shock.

"Great Scott!" cried Connell. "Where are we? What has happened? Are we falling?"

Frank managed to reach up and get his hand on the keyboard. He pressed the electric light lever.

Instantly the whole airship was ablaze with light.

But through the windows the astonished voyagers saw only impenetrable gloom, broken by vivid flashes at rare intervals.

"Where are we?" cried Connell.

"Begorra, phwere are we?" cried Barney, in bewilderment.

It was the general query. Frank's face was extremely grave as he made reply:

"I believe we are snatched up by the comet's tail and being carried no one knows how far into space."

A silence like that of the tomb followed this statement. A cold, awful sensation stole around the hearts of all. It was as if all hope were dead and naught but utter annihilation was upon them.

Connell broke the spell in a hoarse, quavering voice.

"My God! we shall never see home or the earth again!"

"I fear the worst!"

Frank stepped to the keyboard and turned on the electric searchlight.

A great blaze of light shot out into the gloom.

Neither did this seem to be gloom, properly speaking, but a dense cloud of dust-like particles. They were swirling and swaying about the airship furiously.

At times small particles of some matter like pebbles would rain upon the deck or the cabin roof of the Cloud Cutter.

It was almost impossible for the voyagers to conjecture where they were or how far from the earth.

They simply knew that the airship had become involved in the comet's tail and was being carried nobody knew how far into space.

It is difficult for the author to depict their impressions or the sensations experienced by them.

Let the reader imagine himself in just such a predicament. It is the only way.

On and on they were whirled through the dust cloud of the comet's tail.

What would be the end of it all?

Where would they eventually terminate their experience? Would it be in some other planet?

Or would they be held prisoners for thousands of years in the trail of Verdi's comet, going around the arch of the heavens long after death had come upon them to claim their spirits?

All these thoughts and theories went through the minds of the voyagers.

It is needless to say that they were in a state of the most intense excitement, and the mental strain was almost unbearable.

Barney and Pomp stood it best of all.

They had implicit faith in the ability of Frank Reade, Jr., to bring them out of the scrape safely.

Had he not done so before? Could he not do it again?

"Huh!" said Pomp, "don' yo' fink but Marse Frank he fin' a way to get back home ag'in. Yo' kain't fool dis chile. Marse Frank, he know wha' he am about."

"Bejabers, it's all foolish to think we ain't niver goin' to git back!" averred Barney. "Shure I've been in many a wuss scrape nor this wid Misther Frank."

Estelle Layton was, perhaps, as courageous as any.

"If this is to be our fate," she said, philosophically, "so it must be. We cannot hope to alter it. We are in the hands of God!"

Frank said nothing, but did a heap of calculating and thinking.

After a long while he declared:

"There is just one hope for us."

"And that?" asked Connell, eagerly.

"There is a chance that the tail of the comet will brush the other Pole of the earth in its upward sweep. You know that the earth revolves upon its axis, and consequently the comet is not always visible from the same position."

"Exactly," cried the youth, eagerly. "I see your point. The earth in turning may bring its other Pole in contact with the comet's tail, or into the verge of the atmosphere."

"Yes. Of course there is no certainty of such a thing. It is only a chance. We can only accept it as a drowning man's straw."

"At least it is something," cried Connell, joyfully. "We may still cling to hope."

So the spirits of all in a measure rose. All pressed their faces to the windows and gazed out into the flying wall of strange dust.

Lost in a comet's tail!

This was practically their position. It is hardly necessary to say that the reflection was one almost sufficient to stun human sensibility.

It made a great impression upon Jeptha.

"Wall, I'll be sniggered!" he muttered. "I never expected tew git as high up as this 'ere. If my wife, Sally, naow knew whar I was she'd say thet she never believed I'd git so near tew heaven. I don't see what's tew prevent my gittin' thar naow!"

The Yankee, however, did not seem to have any fear of consequences or of the result. He was as cool as need be.

And meanwhile the airship kept on its way in the comet's tail.

Frank tried many experiments. He made the effort to propel the airship against the powerful current of material. In this he was partially successful.

But not enough progress was made to be especially appreciable or of any particular advantage. Still he kept the searchlight at work looking for an opening in the immense swirling cloud.

At times he saw great masses of fiery material go sweeping by through the clouds.

These he at once recognized as huge aerolites or meteors, and he shivered as he reflected on what would be the result if one of these should strike the airship full force.

It would mean instant and utter annihilation—death in its most sudden and awful form.

But as time went on and there came no change all became morbidly resigned to the situation.

Frank was curious as to the state of things outside the pilot-house on the deck of the airship.

He knew that there could of course be no atmosphere. He ventured once to open a small slide in the window.

There came into the pilot-house a cloud of dust that was sufficient to choke an ordinary mortal. It was extremely pungent, having an odor akin to burning brimstone.

Frank closed the slide and proceeded to analyze some of the dust.

The result was surprising.

He found many chemical substances, the character of

which indicated that the comet was in a state of intense fusion and threw off this odor itself.

However, the young inventor was not yet satisfied.

Among his many inventions was that of a diver's helmet with a reservoir and chemical generator to be worn upon the back.

With this helmet he could travel under water or anywhere air did not exist. He now brought out this apparatus.

"Wha' am yo' gwine to do now, Marse Frank?" asked Pomp. "Dere ain' no chaince to go divin hereabouts."

"That is true, Pomp," said the young inventor, "but I have another use for the helmet."

"'Deed, sah?"

"I am going out on deck for awhile."

"On deck, sah? Shuah yo' will be blown off, sah."

"I guess not," said Frank, confidently; "at least I do not believe it."

"A'right, sah! Mayn't I go wif yo,' sah?"

"If you wish," said Frank. "You must find a helmet."

"Dat am easy enough, sah."

So Pomp presently joined his master with a helmet also. This was not all.

The others saw Frank and Pomp thus arrayed, and Connell cried:

"Are there more of those helmets, Frank? I would like to go, too."

"Certainly," replied Frank. "There are a dozen of them down-stairs. You can all go if you wish."

It is needless to say that this idea at once became popular.

It was a change, and though slight, was nevertheless eagerly embraced.

Even Estelle donned one of the helmets.

And thus equipped they all went out onto the deck. It was for a moment difficult to face the stinging shower of dust.

But this was finally overcome and they rather enjoyed the change from the cabin. It seemed like a bit of newly acquired freedom.

They paced the deck silently, for it was difficult to talk intelligibly through the thick walls of the helmets.

The searchlight's rays were thrown far out into the dazzling, glinting dust cloud. Frank was in the bow watching this.

Barney and Pomp and Jeptha were by the cabin door.

Connell and Estelle were leaning over the stern rail. They could converse by placing their helmets together.

Suddenly a strange and unprecedented thing happened.

There was a blinding flash of light, a detonation, and the airship received a terrific shock.

An aerolite had burst not many yards distant. Estelle lost her hold upon the rail, and before Connell could catch her, went over and out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

It seemed to Connell at that moment as if his senses would desert him.

"My God! My God!" he shrieked. "She is gone, gone! Oh, save her, save her! My life is naught!"

Barney and Pomp and Jeptha had seen all and now came rushing up to the spot.

Barney threw himself upon his stomach and leaned over the verge of the airship's deck.

He of course did not expect to see the young girl.

It was the belief of all that she would descend with frightful velocity to the earth.

What an awful fall! It was dreadful to reflect upon!

But in that moment they had forgotten one important fact.

They were in the comet's tail.

Hence they were removed from the earth's gravitation. Anybody in that swirling mass of dust and wind must of necessity be involved in the career of the comet's tail unless it had velocity and power enough to break away into space.

Consequently our heroine did not descend to the earth hundreds of miles below—perhaps thousands.

On the contrary she simply was carried along in a parallel course with the airship, though she had sunk some twenty or thirty feet below the airship's keel.

It was likely that the current was more dense at that point, and supported her much better.

All saw the force of the situation now and understood why it had been so difficult heretofore to hold a position on the deck.

That which they had taken for wind was a certain buoyancy caused by the lack of essential gravitation.

Barney shouted joyfully and put his helmet close to Frank's.

"Begorra, we'll save her!" he cried. "Shure yez have only to throw her a rope."

"Get one quick, then!" cried Frank, excitedly; "lose no time."

Barney needed no further bidding.

He sprang into the cabin and quickly emerged with a rope. Carrrying this to the rail, he threw it over.

To the astonishment of all a new difficulty was encountered. The rope would not descend.

But instead it simply trailed along behind the airship.

"Weight!" cried Connell; "it needs weight!"

"Pull it in, begorra!" cried Barney. "Shure I have a way!"

The brave Celt fastened one end of the rope about his waist. Then he leaped over the rail.

He floated slowly down until almost on a parallel with the young girl. But a new difficulty now arose.

She was slowly but surely drifting away from the course of the airship. Barney was not within reach of her.

A thrill of agony pervaded the breasts of those on board the airship.

"Oh, my soul; she is lost!" groaned Connell.

Frank threw out more rope. Pomp ran to the keyboard to bring the electric engines to what use he could.

The darky reversed them. As good fortune had it it was sufficient for the purpose.

Barney just reached the hem of the young girl's dress. He grasped it and drew her toward him.

A great cry of joy and relief went up from those above.

It required but little strength to bring them floating upward.

Then Estelle came over the rail and was clasped in Connell's arms.

"God be praised!" cried the youth. "I am happy once more!"

But there was no longer a desire to remain on the deck. All sought safety in the cabin.

With their helmets off they were free to discuss the affair.

The amount of praise credited to Barney was large. He was plainly the lion of the occasion.

Now that the excitement of the affair was over the reaction came on. All relapsed into a state of almost positive stupor.

Frank was the only one not affected.

The young inventor had not been idle from the first. His wonderful brain had been constantly at work.

The result was that he had hit at last upon a daring plan.

"Connell," he said suddenly; "I want to speak with you."

The youth followed him into the cabin. Frank picked up a chart and a bit of paper covered with mathematical computations.

"I have been doing some figuring," he said, "and I reckon that the comet ought to be visible in its fullest at the North Cape in Europe on the nineteenth of November."

"Indeed," exclaimed Connell, with interest.

"It is now the 21st of August."

"That will be three months hence."

"Just so."

"Then we may hope to break away from this thralldom?"

"Not without a tremendous effort, but at that time we shall be nearer the earth than we ever will be again. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"It will be better for us to wait until that time before making our effort to break out of our present state of imprisonment."

"That is all very well," said Connell, slowly; "but I do not exactly understand how we are going to break away."

"But one thing will do it."

"And that?"

"Violent explosions."

"Ah!"

"They will scatter this ever-rolling cloud of magnetic dust and throw the airship into some sort of circle of gravitation which I shall hope will be that of the earth."

Connell was dazed.

The stupendous nature of the plan appalled him. Such deep reckoning as this was beyond him.

"What explosives have we?" he asked.

"Dynamite," replied Frank. "I shall invent a method of launching it from the airship and exploding it by time fuse. Oh, it can be done."

"I don't dispute your word," said Connell; "in fact, I believe you are capable of accomplishing anything under the sun."

Frank laughed at this.

"So far I am all theory," he said. "We shall have to

wait for the practical application until the nineteenth of November."

"Mercy on us! that is a long while to wait," said Connell, ruefully.

"Yet we must make the best of it."

"True; and we will."

It is needless to say that the voyagers had no further desire to venture out upon the deck. The risk was too great by far.

Days passed, but the only way that their transition was made apparent to the voyagers was simply by the record of the chronometer.

This told them the coming of each morn and the passing of each evening.

Regular hours were kept just the same as on the earth.

And still they were hustled on through that eternal void by the hustling, whirling chaos about them.

Would there never be an end to it?

Why did they not fall out of it all? What centrifugal or other force, what law of gravitation kept them in their present position?

All these things were a mystery to Frank. He studied them in vain.

All that he could arrive at was that some law of attraction held them still in the booming mass of the comet's tail.

As long as this continued so they must be continued to be whirled through space. If some powerful reaction could be brought to bear—what then?

Would the airship be hurled beyond the influence, magnetic or otherwise, of the comet?

If so, then what must become of the airship in space?

What would become of it in that drear, echoless void which is supposed to exist between all the planets and their atmospheres?

Would it mean simple suspension forever? Could the machinery make any impression upon this space or any progress?

Or was there some law of gravitation always present in space which would draw the airship with frightful velocity in some given direction, perhaps to the earth, perhaps to some other planet, perhaps to the sun or moon?

Who could say?

Who could know?

Day and night Frank taxed his brains with this great problem. That is, such day and night as the chronometer indicated, for there was no interval of light, but perpetual gloom.

If the airship could extricate itself from the comet's tail would it be any better off?

All these questions, doubts and fears were pondered upon.

Frank began to wax thin, and even sickly with such a superfluity of thought.

He had about given up in despair when there came a turn in the tide of affairs.

Scarcely a month had elapsed since his talk with Connell, when he had predicted that it would be the nineteenth of November before it would be safe to attempt to change their position by means of the dynamite.

This month had seemed almost like an eternity to the voyagers.

A whole lifetime had been experienced in that brief while. Perhaps Connell felt it worse than anybody else.

"Oh, Frank," he cried, "anything is better than this. Oh, for a change of some kind—no matter what it is, even if for the worse!"

"There will be a change very soon, I am thinking," said Frank. "Do you notice any change in our surroundings?"

Connell was surprised.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Look at the comet's dust through this glass. Can you see any change in color or density?"

Connell complied with this request.

He was astounded, and laid down the glass for a moment, overwhelmed with the force of the thing.

"Indeed, yes," he said. "There is a very material change."

The dust had changed from its golden brown hue to a fiery red. It was also less dense.

CHAPTER IX.

A STARTLING EXPERIENCE.

"I thought I could see sparks of fire," declared Connell. "Can it be possible?"

"Come with me," said Frank.

The youth followed Frank into the pilot-house. The young inventor then pointed to a thermometer upon the outer side of the airship.

It recorded a temperature of one hundred and fifteen degrees.

"Whew!" exclaimed Connell, "it is hot out there!"

"You are right."

"What has the temperature been heretofore?"

"Very mild; perhaps eighty, never over ninety."

"This indicates—what?"

The two men looked at each other.

Frank said impressively:

"It means serious things for us. Some powerful attraction is drawing us nearer the comet. If the heat increases in proportion for the next forty-eight hours we shall be incinerated like corpses in a crematory."

"Ye gods!" gasped Connell in horror; "is this true?"

"It cannot be denied."

"And with only forty-eight hours between us and eternity?"

"I may safely say that such is the case."

Both men were quite pale. The lips of the youth quivered, and he put a hand on Frank's shoulder.

"Oh, Frank," he said, "I am not afraid to die, but only think of her, so young, so fair, with so much to live for! It is horrible to think of such a fate descending upon her!"

"Nevertheless we are in the hands of fate," said Frank; "and we are powerless to avert it. I am sorry for Miss Layton. But death must come to all."

"Oh, is there nothing we can do?"

"I can think of nothing."

"But the dynamite," cried Connell, eagerly. "Why not try it now? Why not break away, if we can, from the comet's tail?"

"Of what avail would it be? We would be hurled through space to what part of the universe we cannot say."

"As well die one way as another," argued Connell. "As you say, we have only to die once."

Frank was reflective.

There was certainly logic in what Connell argued. He made up his mind all of a sudden.

"I have decided," he said.

"What?" asked Connell, eagerly.

"I shall try the dynamite."

"God be with us now! All depends on that."

"All depends on the dynamite."

Frank started for the hold of the airship. But he had not taken three steps into the cabin when an astounding thing happened.

There was an unearthly glare, a rumble and a crash as of ten thousand thunders. The airship whirled about like a top and turned end for end.

One moment the voyagers and all portable articles in the cabin were bumping against the cabin roof and then against the floor.

It was certainly a most terrific experience. It did not last long, to be sure.

Yet in that brief while all received bruises which they carried for many days. Not one in the party but firmly believed that his last hour had come.

And this belief was well warranted, to be sure.

But the airship did not go to pieces, as was greatly feared. Indeed no serious harm was done beyond the smashing of a few articles.

As soon as he was able Frank was upon his feet and rushed into the pilot-house.

"What has happened?" gasped Connell, joining him; "for mercy's sake, what has happened?"

"Look for yourself!" cried Frank. "Upon my word, I believe the comet has burst!"

A tremendous dense cloud of what looked like volcanic ashes was sifting about the airship.

The cause of this was not at all apparent. Presently it began to grow more thin.

Then all was dissipated as if by a gust of wind.

The airship dropped out of this cloud, and for the first time in many weeks the blue canopy of heaven burst upon the view of all.

The truth crossed upon Frank like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

"Heaven be praised!" he cried. "We are out of the comet's tail at last!"

"Out of the comet's tail!"

The cry was taken up and all the voyagers rushed into the pilot-house. Only immense clouds fading away into the blue ether could be seen of the comet.

The comet of Verdi had terminated its existence.

It was no more. It had run its course. Even comets must have an end in the law of nature.

How it had terminated its existence it was not easy to guess. Certainly in a violent way; probably by voluntarily bursting or collision with an unusually large aerolite.

The comet's material had been dissipated into space. The airship was freed.

There was the sun riding in the blue ether.

Instinctively all looked down for the earth.

A general exclamation of surprise escaped the lips of all.

There it was, but how strange it looked. An immense surface of hazy blue, with great straggling patches of clouds showing against it.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Connell. "Are we not a frightful distance from it?"

"It is impossible to calculate how far," declared Frank.

"I swan tew man!" gasped Jeptha. "However will we git back there—kin anybody tell?"

"Huh! don' yo' worry 'bout dat!" said Pomp with fine scorn. "Yo' kin bet yo' life dat Marse Frank he fin' de way back."

"Be me sowl, that's thrue enuff," agreed Barney. "Shure, did he iver make a failure av anythin' yet?"

The confidence of Barney and Pomp in Frank's powers was unlimited.

Nothing could be distinguished from the earth's surface. Landscape there was none; it was only a blue, hazy wall against the sky. Dense banks of clouds intervened at periods.

The airship appeared to be entirely stationary. Connell could not help but remark upon that fact.

"We are hung up, Frank," he cried—"suspended in space."

The young inventor was thoughtful for a moment.

Then he said:

"I believe that we are falling."

"Falling!" gasped Connell.

"Yes."

The youth was astounded.

"Why, I do not see the slightest evidence of such a thing," he said.

"You do not?"

"No."

"What would you regard as evidence?" asked Frank.

"Why, certain manifestations—the sensation of falling, the rapid approach of the earth, and—and certainly some motion of the airship."

Frank smiled.

"We are in space," he said. "There can be no agitation of atmosphere or motion of the airship, for there is no atmosphere; in fact, absolutely nothing to create friction or jar."

Connell looked puzzled.

"I cannot believe but that we are stationary," he said. "At least let us make an experiment."

He went into the pilot-house and picked up the end of a loose cord. This connected with the small flag-mast overhead.

He pulled on the cord and sent the flag up to the peak. There it hung listlessly and idly.

No breath of air stirred its folds. It did not even quiver, but hung limply on the pole.

Connell pointed to the flag triumphantly.

"What did I tell you?" he cried. "There is proof!"

Frank laughed.

"Do you call that proof?"

"Well, is it not?"

"Not the least bit of it. It is only confirmation of my claims."

Connell was astonished.

"Why, is it not easy to see?" he cried; "if we were falling that flag would show agitation."

"Again you forget," said Frank, quietly; "there is no atmosphere here to act upon the flag. The motion of the atmosphere is what is lacking. We are absolutely in a void, in empty space. There is no tangible element about us."

Connell was not yet convinced.

"But there must be some friction if we are falling."

"It is not appreciable."

Again the youth looked down at the earth. He gave a little start.

"On my word!" he exclaimed. "It looks nearer!"

"Exactly," said Frank, confidently. "When we plunge

into the atmosphere then your flag will float, but not before."

"Then we are actually shooting from space into the earth's atmosphere."

"Just so."

"Wonderful!" cried Connell; "but—the sudden collision with the atmosphere—the shock—can it be of harm to us?"

"Undoubtedly it would were we to shoot at this speed all the way to the earth. The friction of the atmosphere would consume us with terrific heat, just as it affects the aerolite, which blazes for a moment and disappears."

Connell was convinced.

His face lit up joyfully.

"Then," he said, "we are reasonably sure of a safe return to the earth?"

"I think so."

"That is good."

"But the danger is not over yet by any means. Much may happen to us before we reach our mundane sphere."

"Let us hope not," said Connell. "I wonder how long it will take us to reach the limit of the atmosphere."

"Not more than an hour, I think, at this rate," declared Frank. "Yet of course it is impossible to estimate, and the space below is, of course, as we know, decreasing rapidly all the while. We are not under the influence of any power of gravitation emanating from the earth. Quite to the contrary."

CHAPTER X.

SUSPENDED IN SPACE.

Connell was astonished.

"Then how do you account for it," he said, "that we are traveling so rapidly toward the earth?"

"Mere chance, or rather force of fortunate circumstances, that is all. Being beyond the limit of terrestrial atmosphere, we are of course beyond the influence of the earth's gravitation. That is easy enough to see."

"Oh, yes, of course," persisted Connell; "but what propelled us so fortunately in this direction in the first place?"

Frank looked astonished.

"Don't you remember," he said, "the comet in its explosion, of course, hurled us in this direction."

Connell looked crestfallen.

"Oh, yes, of course," he exclaimed. "It was stupid in me not to see it. You are quite right."

This ended the discussion. Gradually the blue surface of the earth seemed to draw nearer.

But yet progress seemed slow. It was evident that the airship was not falling very rapidly.

Frank and Connell were continually engaged in studying the earth with a glass.

Considerably more than an hour passed.

It was evident that Frank was not quite correct in his reckoning.

"That is queer," he muttered. "Either we are not traveling very fast, or else the distance is greater than I had reckoned on."

"That is no doubt the explanation," said Connell. "It is logical. However, we may hope to get there some time."

But a dubious expression had come into Frank's eyes. He was doing a heap of thinking.

However, the airship continued to draw palpably nearer to the earth.

This was proved by the fact that the line of cirrus clouds so far below were becoming plainer to the view.

After a time Frank changed his glass for another and said:

"I am quite sure I can see the landscape on the earth now. Do you agree with me?"

Clarence was thoughtful.

"Indeed it would seem so," he said. "Yes, there is surely a mountain peak. And there—that silver basin! It must be a lake or a bay, or perhaps part of the ocean."

The two voyagers were now not a little excited.

But they were unable to distinguish more than this in the next two hours.

Frank was indeed puzzled.

He could not understand the phenomenon at all. They did not seem to be moving a bit nearer.

A horrifying thought struck him.

Could it be possible that the volition of the airship had ceased?

Had it lost its impetus and come to a halt in space? Was this to be their fate?

"Ugh!" he muttered. "I can't say that I like that idea at all. Something must be done to offset that."

But he was of course decided to first make sure of this fact. How was this to be done?

After all it was simple enough.

For the past few hours they had been unmistakably drawing rapidly nearer to the earth.

For the next hour, if they drew no nearer, or there was no change, he would be assured beyond all peradventure that they were anchored in space.

Some impetus, some force would be necessary to throw them into the lower atmosphere. What this should be he must in the meanwhile decide.

So he waited.

Time went on.

The hour passed.

There was no change.

Frank waited another hour and another. Thus a day and a night passed.

The sun disappeared beyond the disc of the earth and the moon appeared. At the customary interval the sun appeared again.

This was evidence that they could not be more than five hundred miles from the earth.

Frank tried some experiments. He lit a taper, which burned brightly in the atmosphere of the cabin. He placed it through a small slide outside the pilot-house.

It flickered, and instantly went out.

"It is vacuum," declared the young inventor. "We are suspended in space."

"Then we are lost!" groaned Connell; "there is no help for us!"

"Quite to the contrary," said Frank, resolutely; "there is always hope while there is life!"

And he at once began to study out a plan for extricating the airship from its present predicament.

Meanwhile Barney and Pomp and Jeptha had been enjoying themselves in their characteristic fashion.

Far too thoroughly imbued with animal spirits were they, far too buoyant to allow the exigencies of the moment, no matter how perilous, to seriously interfere with their peace of mind.

Barney and Pomp had absolute faith in Frank. As for Jeptha, he perhaps had not a perfect realization of the situation.

However it was, these three kindred spirits cast dull care and fears away and pitched in for enjoyment.

In the sanctity of the cooking galley, where Pomp reigned supreme, they were safe.

And there they spent much of their time laughing and joking and having a good time generally.

Jeptha, like most genuine Yankees, was a remarkable story teller.

He was particularly weak upon the subject of bear stories.

"It makes me think of a durned clever thing that happened up in Green Caounty," he said, biting a plug of tobacco in twain with his powerful teeth. "It wuz ther most curus thing yew ever heerd tell of."

"I reckon it am a true story, sah," intimated Pomp.

"Sartin; I wouldn't tell yew a lie!"

"Begorra, it must be a bear sthory, thin," said Barney, mischievously.

"Well, in a suttin sense it is," declared Jeptha. "I kin tell yew how yew kin bag mutton an' bear meat all in one shot, but yew kin writ it daown that I'm ther haytosser thet did it."

"I s'pose yo' fired a shot dat went froo a sheep and killed a bear, sah?" asked Pomp.

Jeptha made a deprecatory wave of his hand.

" 'Tain't nothin' so easy as thet," he said. "Yew see, it was sugaring off time up in old Varmount, an' I wuz out tendin' tew my sap buckets an' hed got intew a deep part of ther woods nigh an old pastur.

"Wall, naow in thet pastur Jed Springle, my neighbor, hed some sheep. 'Twas a risky thing keepin' sheep in sich a place anyway; but howsumdever Springle alwus was a risky cuss.

"Wall, I wuz pooty nigh ther fence when I heerd a scramblin' an' a terrible growl. It made the ground tremble like.

"Up I jumps, an' great Jerushy! over thar in thet pas-

tur thar wuz a sheep runnin' fer its life an' ther biggest black b'ar I ever seed arter it. Time fer action, I thought.

"I jest hed my old long-barreled gun with me, an' I made over thet fence in a jiffy. Great plums! I never seen so big a b'ar in my born days! He was as much as nine or ten feet tall, an' had a large gaping mouth like an alligator.

"Wall; afore I cud git atween him an' ther sheep, it wuz all over. He jist picked thet lamb up in his fore paws, twisted it up into a ball like, an' doused it down his throat, an' swallowed it hull on't wool an' all."

Barney slipped out of his chair onto the floor with a dull thud. Pomp, just in the act of tasting some spiced peppers, stuck the spoon in his eye instead of his mouth.

"Mither av Moses!" gasped Barney, "whoiver heard the loikes?"

"Golly dat am wuss dan any 'possum story dat I eber heerd."

"Wall, it's a clean fact. If yew don't believe yew jist go up in Varmount an' ask Jed Springle. He was jealous bekase I shot the b'ar, an' sued me fer trespass. I got even by suing him fer keepin' dangerous animals on his premises without a license."

"Arrah, thin it was a tame bear," cried Barney.

"Naw, it warn't nothin' of the kind," replied Jeptha, indignantly.

"Well, yo' habn't tole us yit how yo' killed dat bear," said Pomp.

"Shot him, of course," replied Jeptha; "put a ball inter his eye, condemn him, an' killed him quicker'n yew cud say whiskey. What do yew suppose I did with him?

"Wall, I went daown an' got a yoke of oxen an' a drag an' hauled him daown to my barnyard an' cut him open. What do yew suppose we found inside of him?"

"De sheep, I reckon," said Pomp.

"Of course," sniffed Jeptha. "But let me tell yew thet warn't nuthin'. Thar was old Jemima Grindle daown tew Sprattville as had her house burglarized. At least it wuz broke intew an' a lot of stuff stolen, an' everybody sed it wuz a burglar.

"Wall, naow, in thet bar's belly we found six pewter spoons, tew tin pans, a jewsharp, one print gaown, an old pair of wimmen's shoes, a table cloth, a crazy quilt an' a fryin' pan with a half-cooked trout in it. An' all jist as nat'ral as life: not hurt in ther least. I reckon old Aunt Grindle hes ther print gaown naow as slick as ever, an' is cookin brook trout in thet same fryin' pan.

"Oh, an' as to ther sheep; it wasn't hurt in the least partikle, 'cept of course it wuz dead. Never eat a better leg uv mutton in my life. An' Jed thought I hed no right tew it bekase ther b'ar wuz shot in his pastur. Naow, yew see, ther moment thet sheep went intew ther stummick uv thet b'ar it wuz wild game, an' yew know what ther laws are in regard tew wild game. It's any man's property, even if he shoots it right in yure dooryard. An' thet's ther story of hoaw I shot ther biggest b'ar in Green Caounty."

Barney had a coughing fit and Pomp fanned himself with a gridiron.

"But thet ain't nothin' to the cattymount I treed up in Caow Caounty," began Jeptha.

But he talked to empty air.

Barney bolted out of one door and Pomp through the other.

A nice soft mass of dough went kerchunk into Jeptha's capacious mouth and nearly strangled him. It terminated the story telling for awhile.

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE COAST.

Frank had spent many days now pondering upon the best and proper move to make.

He thought of the dynamite, but there was even a doubt about the efficacy of this.

It would be easy enough to explode the dynamite but how to do it at a sufficient distance from the airship to make it safe was a problem.

Again, would the explosion be of sufficient power to affect the position of the airship at all? Could it be driven in the right direction?

All these matters Frank pondered well upon before deciding what move it was best to make.

Finally he decided upon a trial of the dynamite.

He perfected a trap with a powerful spring. The trap was placed upon the forward deck of the airship.

Then the young inventor donned his helmet and went out upon the deck, accompanied by Barney and Pomp.

The dynamite bombs with a time fuse were placed upon the trap.

The traps were sprung and the bombs thrown high up into space. Up they went full half a mile.

There they hung suspended. The time fuse burned out and they exploded.

It was a terrible detonation and traveled through the echoless space no one could tell how far.

But the explosion did not affect the airship in the least.

To say that Frank was discouraged would be a mild statement.

"I am afraid ours is a hopeless case," he said. "We must look for the worst."

Below them, yet denied to them, was the earth and home and dear ones.

To be sure there were provisions aboard for fully two years. But what availed that?

If they were held in this position for two years, why might they not be held for a hundred, or during their limit of life. Death must come as soon as the supplies were exhausted.

There was certainly no other means of subsistence.

Game there was none. Birds could not venture into space. There was no atmosphere for any living thing.

No wonder that the spirits of all fell extremely low.

Hope was abandoned.

The hours became dreary voids, empty wastes, useless and tiresome. Great powers! would nothing come to relieve them?

Frank Reade, Jr., grown thin and pale with excessive mental strain, still confined himself to his cabin.

He paced up and down recklessly. He could think of nothing, absolutely no plan.

Thus matters continued for a month.

"Oh, when the comet exploded why could it not have given us just a little more impetus," cried Connell. "We might have reached the earth."

"It was our fate," said Frank, moodily; "it is decreed against us."

"And yet there must be a way."

"Doubtless there is, if we could only hit upon it."

For the first time Barney and Pomp had become impressed with a fear that they were not to get back to the earth again.

Yet it did not affect their courage at all. They were brave men and had faced death too many times to be afraid to die now.

The days came and went, and still the airship hung in space.

One night Frank was aroused by Barney calling him from the pilothouse.

In a few moments the young inventor was by the Celt's side.

"Begorra, Misther Frank, did yez iver see the loikes av that? Shure, it's very quare!"

Above the stars and moon hung high in the blue ether. Below there was a remarkable display of Nature's fireworks.

Myriads of twinkling, flashing lights were seen. They seemed to be shooting in all directions and toward the earth.

"Phwat do yez call it, sor?" asked Barney in amazement.

"It is a shower of meteors," said Frank.

"Meteors, sor?"

"Yes."

"Shure, an' phwere do they cum from, sor?"

"No doubt they are falling all about us now. They are small particles of volcanic material hurling from some exploding aerolite or star with such force that they shoot through space into the atmosphere. They are not visible until they get into the air, where the friction develops their inflammable character."

Barney nodded his head.

"That is very quare, sor," he said; "but—howly smoke! There's a comet, sor, comin straight for us!"

Barney pointed upward with a yell of terror.

Glancing up through the glass roof of the pilot-house Frank beheld an astounding sight.

Coming straight toward the airship there was a great blazing ball of fire.

It was of mountainous size, and though it must have been many hundreds of miles away, it could be seen by its flowing tail that it was indeed a comet.

But if was not a thousandth part the size of the comet of Verdi.

Frank knew that there was no danger of becoming involved in its tail, for it was not of sufficient volume.

But this small comet was coming apparently in a straight line for the airship.

It was looming up momentarily to frightful proportions; certainly if it should strike the airship there would be an end of it and all on board.

That the comet was bound for the earth there was no doubt. It swelled in size like an immense balloon.

"Mercy on us!" gasped Frank, aghast with horror. "We are lost!"

But even as he spoke the comet swirled down and passed over the airship. It must have been fully one hundred miles away, but its influence was distinctly felt.

The airship bounded and leaped and a mist enveloped it. It whirled about like a top and seemed to be swept away into the darkness.

Frank Reade, Jr., had presence of mind enough to reach the keyboard and set the machinery going.

Then he clung to the rail and stared out of the pilot-house window.

It was a time of awful suspense to him.

He was thinking of but one thing and praying that it might perchance come true.

This was that the force of the comet's passage might drive the airship down into the atmosphere.

If this should happen—joy! all on board would be saved.

For a time the airship seemed in the clutch of a fearful power.

Then gradually all cleared away.

Once more the sky was visible, and the stars and the moon.

A long trailing nebulous line extended far downward toward the earth. But this was visible only a few moments.

The comet was gone.

It had fallen upon the earth. Its passage was ended. The rotascopes were busy, and the airship had a peculiar motion.

The earth lay dark and unseen far below.

Frank stepped to the pilot-house door and opened it a trifle. One moment he put his hand there to learn the truth.

Air no longer rushed out of the airship. There was an apparent draught inward, and it was icy cold.

Not quite satisfied he lit a candle and held it out beyond the window.

It sputtered and flickered in the draught, but it burned.

Frank gave a great shout.

It brought all the sleepers from their berths in a hurry.

"W—what's the matter?" cried Connell, in a confused way, as he rushed into the pilot-house.

"Matter enough," shouted Frank. "We are saved!"

"What?"

"We are out of space at last and in the earth's atmosphere."

For a moment this announcement fell upon the air of the cabin, which was followed by a deep silence.

Then a great shout of joy went up.

The voyagers in their delight fairly embraced each other and danced like maniacs.

"Saved! Saved!"

It drove them almost delirious with joy. To think that after all their marvelous experiences they were actually to reach the earth again.

Actually to get back to home and friends.

Life had never seemed so dear, the future never so bright. It was like coming out of a dungeon, or like finding one's way out of a living grave.

"Let us go down at once, Frank," cried Connell. "It seems as if I must at least set foot on earth again to consummate my joy."

"We will descend," replied Frank; "but had we not better wait for day?"

"No, no; go down at once!"

So the airship was allowed to descend rapidly.

Of course the nearer it drew to the earth the stronger the currents of air, though hardly less cold.

It became necessary to put on warm garments, for the cold was bitter.

But down sank the airship.

Through many miles of atmosphere the Cloud Cutter descended.

Suddenly Frank flashed the searchlight downward. A rocky coast, beset with beating waves, was seen.

There was no sign of human habitation anywhere.

It was as bleak and forlorn a place as one could hope to find anywhere, but it looked wonderfully attractive to the voyagers.

It was a patch of Mother Earth, and that was enough.

Down sank the airship.

A landing place was selected on the shore and at a safe distance from the incoming waves.

Here the ship rested. Anchors were thrown out. Then the voyagers leaped over the rail.

CHAPTER XII.

ON WHICH PLANET?—THE END.

They fell down and kissed the earth in their excessive joy. It was like a glimpse of heaven to them.

Words cannot adequately describe the situation.

It was a time of joy and thanksgiving. All were in high spirits.

Soon the light of day began to creep over the land.

Then the party looked out upon the strangest and wildest scene they had ever beheld.

The coast was barren and bleak and desolate beyond description. The sea had a peculiar crimson hue instead of the usual green.

There was no sign of vegetation. No apparent limit to the scene about them.

"On my word!" cried Connell; "this does not look like the earth."

In an instant the same thought ran through the hearts of all. Each turned pale.

"Can it be—that——" began Connell.

"Where are we?" exclaimed Frank. "Truly, as you say, this does not look like the earth. And yet it cannot be anything else."

"Yes," said Connell, with a sudden chill. "We may be upon another planet."

"Impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible in my vision now. We have gone through so many strange experiences. How far we were carried in that comet's tail we do not know. It may have been millions of miles."

"Begorra, let's make the best av it," cried Barney. "Shure, if it's another planet we're on, it'll not be mendin' matthers to foind fault now. We'll be immegrants fer shure."

This was philosophy.

But philosophy or practicability to a homesick soul is a nauseating dose indeed.

Our voyagers did not seem to partake readily of Barney's cheerful spirit.

Barney turned a handspring and Pomp began to walk around on his hands.

As for Jeptha, he filled his pipe for a smoke. It could be said that the others envied the equanimity of this trio at the moment.

And a blessing indeed is a disposition so cheerful that trouble and even danger can be met so easily. Connell could not understand it.

However, the other trio composed themselves after a fashion and resorted to the deck of the airship to talk matters over.

"Come, come," said Frank, with an effort at bracing up; "there is no evidence but that we are upon the earth. We have probably landed upon the borders of what whalers call the Crimson Sea, up beyond the North Cape, and which is only open certain years of mildness of season."

"Does such a spot exist on the earth?" asked Connell.

"Certainly."

"Then let us be more cheerful," cried Estelle. "I feel sure that we are upon our native sphere."

"Of course we are," cried Frank. "It is folly to believe anything different. So let us be off."

Frank called to Barney and Pomp.

But first a hearty breakfast was indulged in. Then a

number of sea birds came sailing over the cliffs to reassure the voyagers that they were really on earth.

After the breakfast was over the airship ascended.

Far to the northward, as the compass read, there was a region of snow and ice.

The airship set out in the opposite direction.

It sailed across the big bay and approached a mighty headland.

"That looks like the North Cape," said Connell.

"No," said Frank; "it is a larger promontory."

The bay had been crossed and they were over a wild and rocky shore when the airship began to sink.

Barney was in the pilot-house.

Frank shouted to him:

"What are you doing, Barney? Put on more current! We don't want to descend here!"

"Shure, sor, ivery bit av the current is on," replied the Celt; "but shure it don't make any difference."

In an instant Frank was upon his feet.

A sudden fear had seized him; he rushed into the pilot-house.

The switch had been set as far as it could possibly go. The airship was surely sinking.

"What can be the matter?" muttered the young inventor.

He sprang down into the engine-room; he quickly inspected the delicate electrical machinery.

This told the story.

"My soul!" he exclaimed; "we are in a bad scrape now!"

"What is the matter?" asked Connell, who had followed him.

"The airship can carry us no further," said Frank. "The engines have gone back on us!"

"But can they not be repaired?"

"No; there is no way but to put almost all new machinery into the airship, and that could not be done at any other place but my shops in Readestown."

The situation was truly an appalling one. For a moment Connell did not speak.

"We are in a bad scrape," continued Frank. "You see, we have traveled many thousands of miles, and the airship has been through many hard experiences."

"Indeed that is true," agreed Connell: "but what are we to do?"

"That remains to be seen. If we are really upon the earth and not some one of the planets, we are all right, because at this season of the year we can work our way along the coast down into Norway."

"You are right," said Connell, his spirits rising; "but what a pity that you will lose your airship. Of course it will likely be a loss."

"Oh, certainly," agreed Frank. "It would not pay me to come back here for it. I can build another for the money it would cost. You see, her engines are worth nothing, and her hull has been severely racked and strained. She will be a total loss to me."

"It is too bad!"

But Frank laughed.

"It is all right," he declared. "It won't break me. I shall give up airships for awhile now anyway. I have several other schemes on hand now."

"Indeed!"

"Before we left home I drew the plans for a submarine boat. That will be my next enterprise."

Connell was interested.

"I shall hope to see that when it is finished," he cried. "You will grant me the privilege?"

"Why, of course," replied Frank. "But what if we are not really upon our native sphere? What if I never see Readestown again?"

"We will pray that such will not be the case."

The airship was but a short distance from the ground now. Barney selected a place for the airship to rest.

It struck the earth and then the voyagers leaped over the rail. There was the end of their aerial voyage right there.

Preparations were at once made for taking leave of the Cloud Cutter.

All necessary and valuable articles that could be removed were taken by the voyagers.

Then the doors of the beautiful airship were locked and it was left alone in that desolate part of the earth.

There it may be at this day, for aught we know. That it has never been discovered it is safe to say, and doubtless snows and ice storms have beaten it to uselessness ere this.

The voyagers took a sad leave of the airship.

They knew by the keenness of the air that winter was

near at hand, and that there was little time to lose in getting out of that bleak region.

For a winter spent there would not be a desirable experience. So they set their faces southward.

Along the coast they trudged with heavy step. It was not possible to make long marches or to travel exceedingly fast, on account of Estelle, who was not over strong.

But steadily day after day they made their way along the coast.

Their provisions hung out well, and they were able to bag some small game each day.

At night they camped in niches in the cliffs, or under some overhanging rocks.

After they had traveled thus for some days an incident occurred which put a new face upon affairs.

They had just turned an angle in a high cliff wall and came in sight of a little sandy strip of beach.

There upon the beach was a boat, elegantly trimmed with brass, and flying a small flag. It was the Stars and Stripes.

Six blueclad seamen were walking along the strand. With a great shout Connell sprang toward them.

"Hurrah!" he shouted; "friends at last!"

He fairly embraced the lieutenant of the marines, who gave his name as Chester Fairfax, of the United States Revenue Cutter Bear.

The lieutenant listened with amazement and incredulity to the story told by the aerial voyagers.

But he said:

"You are countrymen of mine, and in distress. I cannot refuse to aid you. If you will come aboard my vessel I will land you safely at Christiania, where you can get a steamer for England, thence home."

"You are kind indeed," said Frank, warmly. "That will make us all right, and we will repay Uncle Sam some time."

"Uncle Sam asks no pay for protecting his subjects in a foreign land," said Lieutenant Fairfax. "I am pleased to assist you."

It is now a short story.

The voyagers were taken aboard the revenue cutter, and as Fairfax had promised were some days later at Christiania.

It was not difficult at this Norwegian port to get a steamer for England.

There they secured passage on board a steamer for New York.

But on all sides they met with a peculiar experience.

Nobody could be induced to believe their wonderful story. It was regarded as an improbable yarn.

"Lost in a comet's tail! How utterly ridiculous! Why, the tail of a comet is a blazing mass of fire, and would speedily have consumed them and their airship."

Connell grew angry.

"That is all the sense they have," he cried. "It is useless to try to convince ignorant people. But we have had the experience and know it for a fact."

"Wall, thet's enough fer me," declared Jeptha, "an' I don't keer a copper cent what ther rest on 'em thinks."

"Begorra, it's all loiars they're afther thinkin' us," declared Barney.

"Dey jes' orter hab de same sperience to convince dem," said Pomp.

But Frank's friends in Readestown believed the story.

Indeed, scientific men readily accepted the facts, and in all astronomical circles the voyagers were literally lions. This satisfied them.

The author obtained the facts directly from the lips of Frank Reade, Jr., and such testimony is unimpeachable.

"I can say this truly," the young inventor declared, "that of all incidents in my varied and exciting career, this has been in all respects the strangest and most thrilling."

We know that this will satisfy the reader, so with his kind permission we will close the matter.

Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp returned at once to Readestown.

As for the two lovers, Clarence Connell and Estelle Layton, life opened new vistas of happiness to them.

Of course they married and settled down happily. But they were frequent visitors at Readestown, and Frank Reade, Jr.'s warmest friends.

Of course they will never forget that thrilling experience on board the airship in the comet's tail. It is a subject of constant discussion.

And Jeptha, the valiant hunter of b'ars and cattymounts, hied him back to his beloved old Varmount.

Frank Reade, Jr., received this letter from him some time afterward:

"DEER REED,—I arriv in Sprattville O. K. It seems good tew be hum. All ther gals are arter me, an' ther people are tarkin' about runnin' me fer High Sheriff. P'r'aps I'll accept, but I'm goin' tew hev wun more b'ar hunt, an' if yew'll cum up here an' jine me I'll guarantee yew more b'ar tew ther squar inch than yew'll find anywhar else atop of ther earth. Best respex tew yew, frum yure everlastin' friend,

JEPTHA JONES."

With this, dear reader, let us take a kind farewell of the characters of our story of a flight in the air with Frank Reade, Jr.

THE END.

Read "UNDER FOUR OCEANS; OR, FRANK READE, JR.'S SUBMARINE CHASE OF A 'SEA DEVIL,'" which will be the next number (59) of "Frank Reade Weekly Magazine."

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